

God's Plan for the Ages

Understanding the Dispensations

Lesson 3 – Those who are not Dispensationalists

Introduction

Dispensationalism is a system of theology that recognizes the different *stewardships of man under God*. It is distinguished by three things:

- A consistent literal interpretation of the Bible;
- A clear distinction between Israel and the church;
- The glory of God as God's ultimate purpose in the world.

When God's Word, the Bible, is taken in a consistent, literal manner it will result in dispensationalism. It is currently the most popular scriptural interpretative method in American evangelicalism and has been so from the latter half of the 19th century.

Covenant Theology, however, has been the theological system for most of Protestantism since the time of the Reformation. It is the system favoured by those of a more Reformed or Calvinistic persuasion. While

1. What is a Covenant?

Generally speaking, a covenant is a *promise between two or more parties to perform certain actions*. The word can also be used as a verb as in "We covenant to work together on this project until it is finished." A covenant is very similar to a promise.

The concept of covenant is significant in the Scriptures. A covenant was a well-known concept in ancient times, and covenants could be made between two equal parties or between a king and a subject. The king would promise certain protections, and the subject would promise loyalty to the king. A covenant might be conditional or unconditional.

Some well known covenants in the Old Testament:

- God's Covenant with _____ (Genesis 8:20-22, 9:8-17)
- God's Covenant with _____ (Genesis 12:1-3)
- God's Covenant with _____ (Exodus 19-24)
- God's Covenant with _____ (2 Samuel 7)

Dispensationalists whole-heartedly agree that covenant is a prominent theme in Scripture, but the real issue is whether the Bible teaches the system known as covenant theology.

2. What is Covenant Theology?

Where Dispensationalism sees the Scriptures unfolding in a series of (typically) seven dispensations, Covenant Theology looks at the Scriptures through the grid of the covenant. Covenant Theology teaches that the ultimate purpose of history is the glory of God through the redemption of the elect.

This was and is being achieved through three covenants.

a. The Covenant of _____

Covenant Theology teaches that a covenant of redemption was made (in eternity past) among the three Persons of the trinity to elect, atone for, and save a select group of individuals unto salvation and eternal life. As one popular pastor-theologian has said, in the covenant of redemption, *"the Father chooses a bride for His Son."*

This covenant is not explicitly stated in Scripture, but the Bible does state the eternal nature of the plan of salvation (Ephesians 1:3-14; 3:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:2).

b. The Covenant of _____

Covenant Theology also says that God made a special covenant with Adam which is called the covenant of works. Four things are said about this covenant:

- It was an agreement which God made with Adam.
- It contained the promise of eternal life.
- The condition which Adam had to meet was perfect obedience. He had to do exactly what God said.
- The penalty for disobedience was death (Genesis 2:15-17).

Of course, Adam disobeyed God's command and thus Adam failed to meet the requirements of the "covenant of works."

c. The Covenant of _____

Because of Adam's sin and failure, a second, covenant with man, the covenant of grace, was brought into operation.

This covenant is defined as a gracious agreement between an offended God and sinful man, in which God promises salvation to man if man will believe in the promised Saviour (Genesis 3:15).

The Covenant of Grace is the only hope that sinful men have of entering into eternal life. The only way sinful men can be saved is by the grace of God through faith in God's Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. The _____ of Covenant Theology

Both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology share many common, orthodox convictions about Biblical prophecy.

- Both systems believe in the literal, future return of Christ.
- They both affirm God's future judgment of the righteous and the wicked.
- They both believe in the translation of the saints into glory, and in the resurrection of the just.

Covenant Theology puts great emphasis on God's Grace and on His plan of salvation, which is good.

4. The _____ with Covenant Theology

In the Bible *covenants deal with relationship, while dispensations relate to history.*

Covenant Theology imposes a contrived framework upon the teachings of Scripture relating to God's plan for history, as revealed through progressive revelation and the dispensations.

Covenant Theology in this respect has many problems:

- It begins by assuming two (or three) covenants that are never mentioned in Scripture.
- It tries to unify scripture by saying that Biblical distinctions are merely different phases of the same Covenant of Grace.
- It denies the distinctiveness of the gospel of grace and the gospel of the kingdom.
- It denies the distinction between Israel and the Church.
- It uses a double standard with regard to interpretation of Scripture.
 - Grammatical/Historical for some.
 - Allegorical for those that refer to future events.
- It places the believer under the law.

Some of the outcomes of this are typically found in their teachings and practices which may include:

- That the millennial kingdom of God will not be literally fulfilled. (Amillennial) (compare with Revelation 20:1-7 – ‘thousand years’ 6 times)
- Emphasis on social and political reform to Christianise the world rather than the preaching of the gospel. (merging the church and the kingdom – ‘bringing in the kingdom’).
- That Israel’s existence and ownership of the Promised Land is not permanent.
- That the church began in the Old Testament (compare Ephesians 3:4-6: 5:32)
- Emphasis on observance of the Mosaic law in everyday life:
 - Ten Commandments. (Romans 7, Galatians 5:18)
 - Sabbath keeping.
 - Infant Baptism (based on circumcision in the Old Testament).

Conclusion

In contrast to Covenant Theology, Dispensational Theology attempts to develop the Bible’s philosophy of history on the basis of the sovereign rule of God.

It sees the purpose of human history for God to glorify himself by demonstrating the He alone is the sovereign God.

This includes the redemption of the elect (in Christ) but is broad enough to encompass all of God’s dealing with men, saved and unsaved, the angels, the nations and nature.

Dispensational Theology understands that God in His sovereign rule over mankind has given man **different responsibilities and privileges at different times** and in making these distinctions, **we understand that the Old Testament saints before the cross, and the New Testament believer live in different ways.**

As a result, we are very careful not to carry Old Testament ways of thinking into the New Testament in our grace orientation.

The Dispensations - Four Things to Look For

When we study each of these dispensations, we will be looking for four things:

1. Man's State at the Beginning

What were things like at the beginning of the dispensation? What was man responsible to do? What did God reveal to man? What truth did God put into man's hand?

2. Man's Responsibility

God has given man certain responsibilities and man is required to be a faithful steward of what God has placed in his hand. What responsibilities and obligations has God given to man? What was man told to do or not to do?

3. Man's Failure

How has man succeeded or failed to meet his responsibilities? In what ways did man obey or disobey the house rules? In every dispensation we will see the terrible failure of man. This reminds us again and again that man is a great sinner who is in need of a great Saviour!

4. God's Judgment

When God puts something into man's hand and man fails to handle it properly, then judgment must follow. We will learn that each dispensation ends in man's failure and God's judgment.